

CONSENSUS AND THE CHIEF STAFF EXECUTIVE

While the by-laws of most associations call for majority rule, an association cannot long operate on that basis. To test the validity of this statement, try to imagine how - or even whether - an association would have been established on the basis of, for example, a 15 to 10 vote. Associations, by their very nature, are consensus animals. They are formed by persons or corporations of coincident interests who join together to achieve common objectives. It is, in fact, the consensus nature of the association on which its influence on the world around it is built. Once this consensus is broken, no matter the cause, the association is in decline and will continue in that mode until consensus is restored or the association dissolves.

Consensus within an association can be lost for any number of reasons. Among the more common are differences on a major issue facing the industry or profession, dues structures/levels, program development/orientation and the style and perceived effectiveness of staff management. A loss of consensus is felt most immediately at the staff level. For professionals whose livelihood depends on a consensus of the whole, a split within the group has a telling effect on morale, productivity and, sooner or later, staff turnover. The long-term effect of a split is generally less apparent to those on whom it may well have the greatest impact: the membership. It is not uncommon for the membership to see the split in slices of time - this board meeting and the next, often across several months, even years. Not unexpectedly, trouble in an association may not be a high priority with members whose most immediate interests are likely to be more tightly focused on how their company or personal career is doing.

A broken consensus can be especially devastating on an issues-driven also association; that is, one whose members look to it for representation in legislative and regulatory developments at the federal and state level. The influence and impact of such associations is measured in direct proportion to the percentage of the industry they claim to represent. Congressional and Executive branch leaders answer first (or only) the calls of those who can speak with authority for an industry or profession.

Once questions arise as to whether an association can truly speak on behalf of a sector, access to decision makers suffers and - for those decision makers not already prone to support a position for reasons of principle or politics - can even evaporate. What the membership often fails to appreciate in such circumstances is that for every day this situation continues, it may take 2 or 3 or 4 days to repair it. An association's impact and credibility is built on years of "being there" As it loses its place and role in the process, turning the situation around becomes more difficult with each passing day.

During an association's formative years, the primary responsibility for consensus lies with the membership. It is the membership that formed the association and on whose continuing support and interest it depends. Eventually, however, as a full-time professional staff is brought in, the responsibility for consensus falls increasingly on the chief staff executive. It is the chief staff executive who must understand and anticipate the needs of the membership over time and assist the association's leadership in pointing the group in the direction indicated.

While clearly the membership retains ultimate responsibility for consensus, its promotion and enhancement in the established association must be the first responsibility of the chief staff executive because, in the final analysis, the association cannot exist without it.